

BATTLE OF THE BOOKS SHOWS THE ENGLISH AHEAD

Prof. William Lyon Phelps of Yale University, noted essayist and literary critic, who praises the art of the English writer.



"WE'VE been thoroughly trained in the thought that the American writer is inferior to the British, and it might be interesting to institute a comparison to determine if this is true."—From a lecture by Sinclair Lewis, author of "Main Street," given in the Town Hall recently.

To make this comparison and to test out Mr. Lewis's assertion that we could match England author for author, The New York Herald interviewed prominent publishers and sought the personal comment of such eminent critics as Prof. Brander Matthews of Columbia and Prof. William Lyon Phelps of Yale.

The answers detailed herewith hardly settle the question. They do indicate, however, decided views for and against the Lewis assertion, and show that literature, broadly considered, knows no geography, no matter how earnest the partisans of any school may be.

By WILLIS STEELL.

THAT old contemptuous question, "Who reads an American book?" has been revived lustily by Sinclair Lewis, author of "Main Street," one of the American best sellers of the year, in his lecture quoted above. In addition to his broad assertion that America could match England author for author, Mr. Lewis added that American authors should gain more support from the American reading public. "In essence," he paraphrased a widely known slogan to run: "Read American books first."

The comparison Mr. Lewis urges was sought in the New York publishing houses, but it was not easy to obtain. There are some straight-out publishers here who do not send a representative to London every spring to look over the British literary output, and these purveyors of the written word have scant respect for the writers overseas. They made some strong statements about the question which might be epitomized as follows:

"Arnold Bennett is so uneven that he is apt to hand you a lemon any time his agent offers a new manuscript."

"Locke has written more than a dozen books since 'The Morals of Marcus Cicerone.' They are all versions of that book. 'Wells goes off at half cock. He makes big successes and failures as big. Every publisher distrusts him.'"

And so on, through a long list of British authors more or less famous. There is writing to-day, according to these simon pure American bookmen, not a single Englishman with an audience so vast and loyal that he is "sure fire."

An effort was made about the close of the war to push the claims of American writers on the attention of their countrymen and put some obstacles in the way of foreign authors. The war on the Britishers and other foreign writers started in Chicago. Part of the forces carried on their banners the name of Sherwood Anderson. Said a publisher concerning this battle of the books:

"More might have been accomplished if the chiefs had a better quality of 'aboriginal' author to push. The men they pinned their hopes to weren't novelists, except of the breed that has an idea to start with; an idea that invariably breaks down in the middle of the book. Their authors were really short story writers."

Says First Success Spoils

Many American Writers

"It is a fact," said another publisher, "that book publishers in this country would have to go out of business if they had only American works to bring out. The backbone of our output is the British author."

Then he cited the names of a long list of American writers and followed each name with remarks which these writers would not like to read, they were so uncompromising, adding: "The trouble with our writers is that they won't take the trouble to learn their trade. They make a 'hit' with a first book, perhaps for a reason that is merely accessory. A public is at once established for them and they spend the rest of their working lives disappointing it."

"A new English novelist has a very hard time over here," said J. Jefferson Jones, manager of the John Lane Company, a London publishing house, the New York branch of which is partly independent, adding:

"His chances of a hearing are very much less than an American author's; he has to earn his favor. A good many writers who have enjoyed popularity for a number of years in England are still without due recognition here. Among such writers it is fair to number W. Pett Ridge, who is perhaps too Cockney for our taste; Miss G. V. MacFadden, whose 'Trusty Servant' and 'Honest Lawyer' are widely read over there and scarcely at all here; Maud Diver, a late book by her, 'The Strong Hours,' bidding fair, however, to take her out of the list, and Muriel Hime and Ida A. R. Wylie. Two books by the last named, 'Towards Morning' and 'Children of Storm,' have won real popularity abroad."

"I could add fifty names of contemporary writers in England whose success there would warrant a publisher in thinking it would be duplicated here, but the point I am trying to make is this: The mere fact that he is an Englishman, writing in Eng-

American Writers Fast Coming Into Their Own, as Many Recent Successes Show---No British, Author, Publishers Say, Has So Vast and Loyal an Audience Either at Home or in the United States as to Assure Constant Popularity---Prof. Brander Matthews of Columbia Stanch for Home Talent, Prof. Phelps of Yale Sees Greater Artistry in Britons' Works

land, doesn't give an author the advantage over his American rival. The advantage dwells somewhere else. I think it may be looked for in quality. Nine out of ten British authors offer more to his reader than the American author does. You may call this quality 'background' if you will, or 'fabric.' The name does not matter if the thing is there. It generally is there in the British writer, and it too commonly isn't there in the American.

"Suppose we consider a type of book that is always 'sure fire.' We can always sell a book if we call it a mystery book. Arthur J. Reese and J. E. Ferguson are two Englishmen who write this kind of story. The first is more successful here than he is at home; the second writer, with his 'Steady Terror,' is running Reese hard over here. There are plenty of people writing this kind of story in America, but I do not recall one American writer who takes the pains these men do to invest their yarns with literary style and finally to polish them."

"Facts don't always explain. Extraneous things may lead an author to popularity or comparative neglect, both here and in England. Over there Harry Leon Wilson goes very well and Tarkington not so well. Over here Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy may each have a 'frost' with a new book or may sell in the thousands. Robert Hichens is the same. And if these Britishers haven't



W. J. LOCKE, English writer, who has a steady popularity with American readers

the 'right of way' you're asking about—I assure you they haven't—the lesser lights cannot be expected to."

"What Englishman now writing is most popular in America?"

Many Writers Celebrated Here Are Unknown to English Critics

"That is difficult to answer," said Mr. Jones; "possibly every publisher in the city would give a different man. But I will say that for steady popularity W. J. Locke is the man. For every new book of his an edition of 50,000 (the first edition) is brought out. That, in the talk of the day, 'says something.'"

For all his encyclopedic knowledge Chesterton admitted his complete ignorance of a good many writing Americans who are pretty well known here. American authors of the Bret Harte and Mark Twain type have as many readers abroad as they have at home, and let any writer of a subsequent date to these show the quality of 'humor' then, according to this celebrated critic, he is apt to be picked up and 'touted' by the British press.

Dodd, Mead & Co. are looked upon as distinctly American publishers—that is, they prefer to affix their imprint on works by Americans, yet a number of foreign authors manage to appear in their lists. In these lists appear translations of many famous authors in many languages, and a cursory glance at the lists would not lead to the assumption of a national narrowness on their part. Their opinion, also, is liberal in spirit, for they think that a meritorious American book has as much chance in the world as an equally meritorious French or English book. In other words, a good thing in literature is a cosmopolitan and goes everywhere. A poor thing in English, German, French, Italian, Spanish rarely gets beyond its own country's frontiers. It can die of its diseases at home and doesn't have to go abroad to do it.

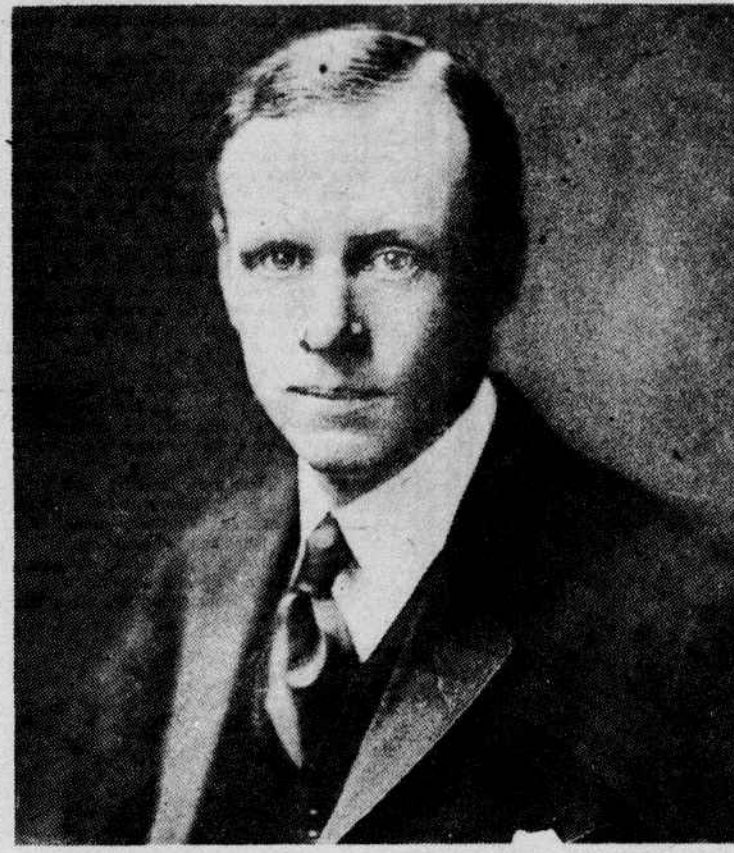
"Who says that British novels have the right of way here—that is, that they are more popular and sell in greater number than our home product?" repeated Prof. Brander Matthews of the chair of English literature in Columbia University. "They haven't this right of way. I cannot recall any novel published in the last decade—not to go back further—in England that has had anything like the sale of 'Main Street,' 'Miss Lulu Bett' or 'The Age of Innocence.'"

"The author of the first named ought to know by consulting his own royalty returns that British novels have no such sale here as the home product. I understand that Mrs. Wharton's book is a best seller, but still far behind the other two in point of sales. Well, it will sell better as it grows older, and it will sell longer than the other two."

"I am a strong believer in friendship of the firmest kind between England and America, but I should call it a bad sign if American books sold better than English books over in England, and vice versa. Every nation needs its own works of fiction with the national background."

"Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes said that books were society in solution, just as tea is tea leaves in solution of hot water. It would be bad indeed for a nation if it took its solution from a foreign country."

"Especially is this true in school books—works intended for use in education. When I was a boy three-quarters of the books we



SINCLAIR LEWIS, young American author in the "best selling" class, who asserts that native writers should receive greater consideration at home if they are to compete with English rivals.

used in schools were of British authorship and maugulature—a great mistake that has been corrected. We make all our own school books now. It is essential that we get our education from books that are written on American ideals and on those of no other country."

Professor Matthews was reminded that Wells, Galsworthy, Walpole, Bennett and one or two others, novelists who are writing in England, had an assured vogue in this country. Their books are bought by Americans in large numbers, and are even more widely read than bought. Said he:

"This may be. I see no reason why it should not be so. I hope it is so. That does not alter my opinion that the British novel has only a fair sale in this country, and then only when it deserves a sale, while an American book that has made a successful appeal sears into enormous numbers. The English novelists named have a pretty steady sale, and the sale of a new book by one of them can be estimated by the number of copies his first successful book sold here. The fluctuation will be found to be slight."

D. Appleton & Co. are becoming more and more publishers and purveyors of American fiction, although they do not exclude good British fiction. A publishing house like this one, that now numbers popular men like Wright in its list, is not apt to rave about its foreign authors. As a matter of fact, this house does not rave nor deal in superlatives. It does believe that the American author has come into his own after more or less wandering in the wilderness."

The best sellers over here are, according to Macmillan & Co., Wells, Arnold Bennett, Hugh Walpole, with several new men like Stacy Aumonier and Sir Harry Johnston creeping up toward their peak of popularity. The spring book published by the indefatigable H. G. Wells, "The Salvaging of Civilization," is expected to sell well, being described as stimulating and especially opportune, but the high water mark of this author seems to be touched in his "Outlines of History," another immense printing of the two big volumes having just been ordered.

An odd thing in connection with the work of authors of either nation—American and British—is that certain authors that sell enormously in one country are barely known

by name in the other. The late Nat Gould, who could not write his stuff fast enough for the hungry British public, obtained no public here. Harold Bell Wright is the enormously selling American who does not seem to be able to stand a salt voyage.

The American manager of an English firm of publishers, who do a fine business in this country, gave his opinion on the various points raised in connection with the authors of the two English speaking countries. Said he:

"I'm too good an American to hold out on our native authors anything favorable that is coming to them, but in a comparison with British authors I have in honesty to hand the latter the palm. They are better educated, they know the language and they are willing to take pains. I have known a good many fine books written here that could have been truly great books, but their authors were content with second best."

"It is rare when a novelist here is not content with his work, although the critics keep telling him how much it might be improved with a little more pains. The American is willing to let it go from him to the public, trusting to its spontaneity rather than to its finish. The latter quality need not kill the former. But few writers here will listen to criticism after they have made a first success. Therefore, they seem to be willing to turn out crude work."

"This may not be the fault of the writer or not wholly so. The public that enjoyed reading his first book urges him to write a second as quickly as possible, and, as he generally needs the money, he yields to the demand and turns out work that isn't his best."

"It is said that Sinclair Lewis declared that New Yorkers do not read. I don't know whether he said this or not; I didn't hear him, but this I can say, that few American writers read. They prefer to deal with material with which they get out of themselves and from observation. I don't say these are not valuable assets for the novelist, for they are. But, with a little well chosen reading added to their natural endowments, they would realize that there are in literature such delightful things as style and polish, and then they might try to get these things into their own books."

"In my position here with a British house,

where many of the positions are filled by young men sent over from London, I can see how very much better equipped these young Britishers are than the young Americans employed to work along side of them. The latter do not know books and have no bookish curiosity. The English boys are grounded in English literature, they know the classics, they know English poetry and can correct quotations when needed without hunting them down in the authors. In fine, these young Englishmen are cultivated to what American youths would call an alarming extent."

Less Chance in England

For Success of Poor Work

"These are the readers of the current English book. They must be written up to and not down to if an author wants to satisfy them. He must have style in his writing and show a basis of real knowledge in his most lively excursion or they will have none of him. If these young men represent the big middle class reading public then it is a public not easy to be satisfied. Certainly it may not be fobbed off by scamped, inferior workmanship."

"Too often a genuine talent is spoiled here by too spontaneous a burst of applause. I read of a first book by a young man of talent these words: 'No finer writing has



H. G. WELLS, British author, whose books sell well on both sides of the Atlantic.

been done in America since Hawthorne than is shown on some of these pages.' The consequence was that in his next book, which was a collection of short stories, the young author by haste and cocksureness in his method exaggerated his faults and perhaps perpetuated them as a sign of his originality. I am informed that he boasted of having written one of the stories, containing 9,000 words, in a few hours."

"Foolish adulation has dried up many a nice little literary trickle that might have run along for miles cooling and delighting the thirsty vicinity. It has harmed English writers as well, but it does not seem to be so common there."

Perhaps the truth may be summed up in another that has long been accepted. It is that a big, real book belongs not to any nation but to the world. But to earn these adjectives for his work, "big" and "real," the author, be he English, American or Continental, will have to consider certain things that are at least suggested in the remarks quoted above, and more, he will have to make them his own."

Prof. Phelps of Yale Frank

In Praise of English Authors

Prof. William Lyon Phelps of Yale University holds pronounced views on the comparative vogue of English and American novelists of the day, and he frankly expressed the reason for the faith that is in him without manifesting much mercy for the authors he mentioned, believing, indeed, that they would be better served by justice. Sitting in the great divan or smoking room of the Yale Club the other evening, he chatted freely about our authors. Said he:

"In my opinion, British novelists of to-day are, on the whole, superior to American novelists. I do not think that our American novelists of the moment are producing work that is equal to the novels of Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, John Galsworthy, J. M. Barrie, H. G. Wells, Hugh Walpole, Arnold Bennett, Archibald Marshall, Alfred Ollivant, W. J. Locke and May Sinclair, to say nothing of others who might be mentioned."

"If any Americans feel badly because English authors sell better in the United States than American authors do in England, one should remember that national boundaries have nothing whatever to do with art. If British authors sell better in America it is because they write better books. This would prove, then, that American readers are good judges of what is best in literature and know how to appreciate it."

"It is true, however, that within the last few years American novelists have shown great improvement. The year 1920 was the best year thus far in the twentieth century for the production of good American novelists."

"In this year were published 'The Age of Innocence,' 'Main Street,' 'Miss Lulu Bett,' three good novels, differing in scope and power, but all far ahead of their immediate predecessors. 'Miss Lulu Bett' is, I think, a notable achievement, wrought as by a chisel, with hardly a superfluous word. It is, in its severe concentration, an austere work of art."

"Main Street' is the antithesis of Miss Gale's novel. It succeeds by being voluminous—by having multitudinous, photographic details. By means of expansiveness it makes an impression of truth."

"To these works of a notable fiction year

Prof. Brander Matthews, who holds the chair of literature at Columbia University, and who sees American authors in the lead.



for America should be added 'The Third Window,' by Anne Sedgwick, who, although living in England, is an American, and Dorothy Canfield's 'The Brimming Cup.' There is a noticeable improvement in craftsmanship in this latest novel of this gifted woman."

"But after we have singled out a bare half dozen whom we feel like unreservedly commending the general inferiority of American novelists remains impossible to forget. What is the cause of this? It may be found, perhaps, in the lack of a long literary tradition. An Englishman sits down to write his novel, aware of all that has been done since Chaucer and haunted by the ghosts of the past. Literature has been cultivated in England for centuries. Its gradual and yet sure growth from generation to generation must increase the veneration of its adepts. Yes, I believe that in literature, as in most of the arts, the older countries have the advantage."

"If we are hurt by a remark like this, then let us get what comfort we can by comparing our literature to that of a much younger country; let us look at Australia, for instance. That is more than an island; it is a continent; its cities, Melbourne and Sydney, are great cities. It has a teeming life in places, where dramatic contrasts inject themselves into ordinary existence. But Australia has not as yet produced one good writer. Let America find comfort in that negative fact."

"Is it not possible also that our fictionists do not prepare themselves as thoroughly as they should before embarking on this 'uncharted sea'? Hawthorne was twice years trying to learn to write. He sold his first stories for \$3 apiece. He described himself as the most obscure man of letters in America. But his long probation, filled with effort, left him our leading and best known man of letters."

"Why go back so far? Joseph Herkesheimer told me that he spent fourteen years toiling away at the art of composition. They were years well spent, for in whatever he puts out we find the 'texture' of literature."

Serial Publication a Hardship

As Authors Are Harassed

"All these statements are generalizations, even when illustrated by specifications," remarked Prof. Phelps, "and what we ought to be finding out, if we care, are the things that keep our 'near great' writers from being altogether great. The serial publication of novels has been injurious to the best interests of literature, I think. It is true that Dickens and Thackeray published their greatest books in parts, and they were harassed—at least Thackeray was—by the effort to keep up with the printer. In the work of both a certain unevenness is to be attributed to this kind of production. And Thackeray's 'Henry Esmond,' his most perfect example of a novel, was not written for this part production."

"The magazines, too, have hurt our authors and our readers. Their needs are so urgent and so vast that they accept—in some cases they seem to demand—hurried work."

"What will happen when all our novelists write with an eye not to the magazines first and public afterward only, but with the other eye on the movies? I shudder to think of it. Must be that they will produce only theatrical rather than dramatic material. They will end as Hall Caine did, who from a kind of sincere writing at his best wound up by penning everything for the melodramatic stage."

Praise of Public and Press

Most Injurious to Writers

"If I seem to have gone rather far in a hopeless view of American fiction, I can say that the adoring press and public, which find a genius in almost every newcomer with talent, by adulation and flattery do more harm to this art than can well be estimated. Of course unworled and unreasonable praise gets nobody anywhere. Adversity can make a good book known, but no amount of it can give permanence to an inferior work."

"On the other hand, harsh and unwarranted disparage will just as surely die away from a good book. An American author, William Allen White, has been given both of these things. 'A Certain Rich Man' and 'In the Heart of a Fool' are books of this general writer which many readers have delighted in and as many others cannot read at all. The first are able and the latter are unable to forget the obvious tract in them. The intense desire of the author to teach has removed these worthy books from the realm of art. Now in 'The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me,' a simple, charming account of two fat men in Europe, William Allen White steps easily into the sanctum of art. In this book he forgot the text and the sermon both and was content to tell his story."

"Other men and women, too, will learn to be simple without being empty; they will be willing to learn their art with years of apprenticeship; they will reject praise for what they know is 'scamped' work. It won't be possible then to number American novelists—the good ones—on the fingers of one hand."

Interesting Notes From Odd Sources

IT is a proverb of modern science that loss of one sense quickens the perception of another. It is the acute development of other senses which makes it possible for the blind to get about with increasing ease; it is the same truth which has given rise to the seeming paradox of the blind leading the blind about London in a fog.

But whatever of scientific fact is behind these things, it is certain from practical experience that the blind are excellent piano tuners, and that the number has grown to such an extent that the Blind Tuners Guild of New York has been chartered, and monthly meetings are held. The present report of the guild shows that the amount of business has increased steadily as the skill of the members became known.

S. T. JEFFERSON FEIGL POST, American Legion, has adopted a welfare plan out of the ordinary which contemplates the purchase of hospital beds in perpetuity to be available for the use of the members that need them. Through its medical committee the post recently established one such bed in the Lutheran Hospital in Convent avenue near 144th street, and Col. Feigl, in honor of whose son the post is named, has donated a bronze tablet to be placed above the bed. The committee expects to purchase two additional beds in a few months. The fund at its disposal was raised at a dance last October and has been kept up by contributions.

Feigl Post, which has headquarters at the Hotel Biltmore, Manhattan, has about 50 per cent. Brooklyn members. William J. Delaney, vice commander, 649 Kosciuszko street, Brooklyn, and Dr. Ralph Goldberg, 562 West 144th street, Manhattan, invite communications from all former members of the First Division, with a view to increasing the membership.

MANY of the leading banks of the country now publish a magazine, and in New York city the custom may almost be called general. The object of these magazines is primarily to bring certain things to the attention of employees of banks, but interest in them has spread beyond the counter and they are read by other people. In an article entitled "Bank Magazines," by Henry W. Toll, in *Godabout*, the significance of these publications is given, also some idea of their extent.

Recently, a plan has been mooted of publishing two editions of the bank magazine, one intended for publicity and the other an employees' edition, exactly the same as the regular edition except for the insertion of an employees' section. The latter edition would contain material of importance to employees, but not suitable or interesting for "outside" circulation.